

## Case Report

# Male genital ornaments: Penis pearls

O.P. Murty MBBS, MD (Associate Professor) \*

*Forensic Pathology Unit, Department of Pathology, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur 59100, Malaysia*

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## Abstract

In this article, five cases with pearls in penile skin are discussed. These cases were viewed from multiple angles as number, colour, position of pearls, socio-economic status, occupation, sexual behaviour, and the background of the individuals. The number of pearls varied from one to five in these cases. The penile skin examination revealed old healed scar marks indicating that probably some had even more pearls. Three persons were directly or indirectly associated with drugs. One of the victim was HIV positive. Two of the cases were of homicide; one died in police custody; one died due to ischemic heart disease; and one had died in accident. The article also discusses the common beliefs behind this practice with review of the literature.

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## 1. Introduction

Male genital ornaments in form of stone or plastic pearls are quite common in this part of world. Several historical records dating back centuries explain the existence of implant and foreign bodies under penile skin to make nodules.<sup>1</sup> The practice of penile balls is documented as having occurred in Southeast Asian Countries for centuries, as shown by penis balls represented in a linga (male organ of deity) of fifteenth century Hindu temple Candi Sukuh in Central Java.<sup>2</sup> The historians believed that the practice indicated the strong position of women in sexual relations and that women in the Southeast Asia took a very active part in courtship and lovemaking, reflecting a high degree of autonomy and equality enjoyed by women here. It was done under belief to increase erotic pleasure of women.<sup>2,3</sup>

It is more popular in Thailand and Indonesia, and migrant workers from these countries carry the practice

to other neighbouring countries. Although it has been suggested that Thai men are most likely to have fang muk, the presence is also known and followed by men from other Asian countries.<sup>4</sup> It is variously known as: fang muk in Thailand, China, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia; bullets in the Philippines; chagon balls in Korea; goli or bullet in India.<sup>4–6</sup>

A piece of hard pearl or hard object or glass is implanted into the superficial fascia of penile skin to create a nodule or a small hump at the shaft of the penis. These pearls are either spirit-cleaned or boiled prior to insertion into dorsum of penis skin. The bead is permanently implanted, once implanted the bead should be moveable and slippery underneath the penile skin during coitus. The fixed beads would lead to painful intercourse and may cause abrasion of the genital organs of both men and women.

Presently, most of the evidence about penile pearls are found in the literature in the form of case reports.<sup>5–11</sup> The beads are usually made from a piece of broken glass, cut and polished into required shapes and sizes. They can also be made from ivory, gems, stones, bullets, plastic, and gold. The number of beads also varies according to personal choices and economic status of the person. In the literature up to 1–10 beads are reported.<sup>6,11</sup>

\* Present address: Room No. 304, Second Floor New Forensic Block, Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi 10029, India. Tel.: +91 9868397155/91 116593274 (Office).

E-mail address: [dropmurty@yahoo.co.in](mailto:dropmurty@yahoo.co.in).

## 2. Case summary

These are few case reports of penile pearls under the skin detected at the time of autopsies. This was an incidental finding in medico-legal autopsies. A total number of 5 cases were observed in time span of 2 years in about 1200 autopsies conducted in this time span. The beads were in the form of glass or plastic rectangular or oval shaped pearls. The number of pearls varied from one to five in this study. The colour of pearls varied from translucent to bluish-green colour. All the persons were less than 45 years of age and were in mobile worker group who frequently changed places because of job compulsions. It comprised two Thai; one Indonesian; one continental Indian; one Malaysian Malay.

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The cause of death in these cases were:

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1. Sudden Death – Coronary artery disease
  2. Homicide – Multiple slash wounds
  3. Custody death – HIV positive with tuberculosis
  4. Construction accident – Multiple injuries
  5. Drowning – recovered dead from river with no visible injuries
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Fig. 1 shows five pearls under the penile skin. This victim had died due to myocardial ischemia. He was an immigrant semi-skilled worker. On close inspection of penis it could be easily appreciated that he also had five old healed scars over his penile skin. He had probably gone for 10



Fig. 1. (a) Five beads are visible, and five old healed scars are shown with arrows. (b) Translucent colour of pearls. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)



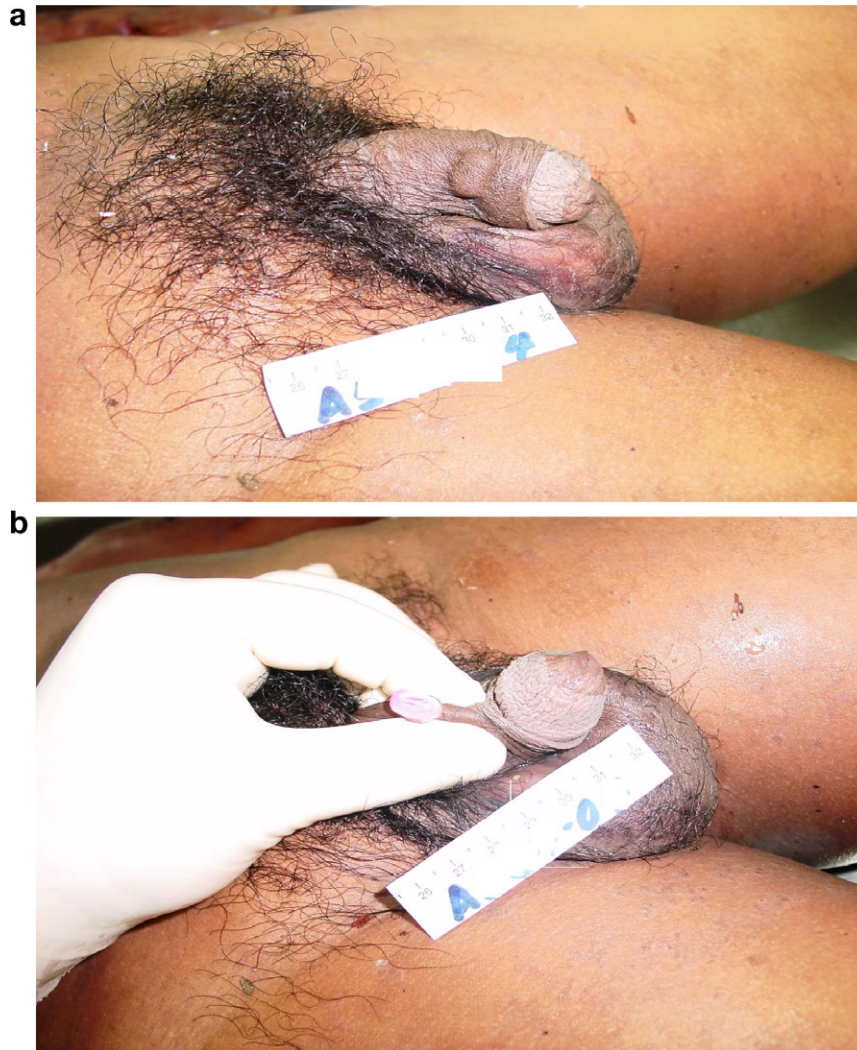


Fig. 2. (a) Penile over dorsum of penis. (b) Pearl was slightly translucent pinkish. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)



Fig. 3. Two pearls visible, marked by arrows.

beads but some how five others had to be taken out. The old healed scars are visible and have been pointed out by arrows. He was negative for HIV and Sexually Transmitted Disease.

In Fig. 2, one mobile penile pearl was found under the penile skin. He died due to the multiple slash wounds in a gang fight. He was immigrant Indonesian and was allegedly involved in drug trafficking.

Fig. 3 is showing photograph of one victim who was a Malaysian Indian of age 26 years, was unemployed and used to do odd jobs for survival. One day his body was

found in river. He had two penile pearls which were also known to his brother, and it helped in his identification.

Fig. 4 shows a greenish-sky blue coloured pearl in prepuce area. He was a Thai migrant construction worker who died due to accident at site.

In Fig. 5, this person was local Malay. He was a known drug peddler and was rounded by police for investigation. On the morning he was found dead in the cell. On testing he was found HIV and Pulmonary Tuberculosis positive. His penis had one penile pearl with multiple old healed scars probably due to extracted pearls.



Fig. 4. Greenish pearl of capsule shape over dorsum of penis in construction worker.



Fig. 5. One fixed pearl is visible, few old scars are shown by arrows.

### 3. Discussion

In the beginning rich people used to have these pearls but currently, people from rural and lower social-economic background adopt it more. These rural people are more likely to become migrant workers or undertake blue-collar jobs in the neighbouring countries.<sup>1</sup>

Several possible reasons can be suggested for this practice which include:

1. Peer influence, to have equality, or group association.
2. It symbolizes manhood and potency.
3. Demand from female partner.
4. To enhance sex.

The procedure of implanting beads is simple and is being performed by pushing the bead through the penile skin after making a small incision with a sharp pointed object. The wound is tightly closed and bandaged with application of antibiotic cream for a week. The site of implant may be on any part of the penile skin even though the dorsum is the most common site. In these five cases also, the majority had them present on the dorsum of the penis.

Both sex workers and non-sex workers, said that these pearls made sex more painful and it is extremely painful in those who had not experienced vaginal delivery. Men experienced no serious side effects after insertion; fixed beads can cause rupture of condoms. For women, the beads can cause abrasions and a few days of pain inside the vagina.<sup>1,12</sup>

From a medico-legal point of view, in this group three had direct and indirect connection with drug trafficking

and travelling. Two victims were general workers and were living alone so their association with commercial sexual activity cannot be ruled out. One of the cases was HIV positive and had contracted it from unsafe sexual relations with multiple partners. Three of the victims were single and other two also had their spouses in other countries. The prevalence is unknown.

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